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Social Studies**

*Erasmus*

## **Choosing Motherhood?**

**Re-thinking the factors that influence young motherhood in low  
socio-economic contexts in Colombia**

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***Disclaimer:***

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

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## List of Acronyms

CCV: Cartagena Cómo Vamos (Cartagena how are we doing)

CONPES: Document of the National Council of Economic and Social Policy

DANE: National Administrative Department of Statistics (Colombia)

ENDS: Demography and Health Survey

JFGE: Juan Felipe Gómez Escobar

OLCB: Observatory Labour Market Cartagena and Bolívar

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

SENA: National Learning Service

UN: United Nations

UNFPA: United Nations Population Fund

## **Abstract**

While recent research in Colombia around young motherhood has been based in the ecological framework, public policy in the country still focuses its strategy to decrease the phenomenon on changing young women's behavior through sexual education and sexual and reproductive services, and fails to recognize the complex and constrained structure in which young women are embedded. Likewise, research, policy and practice in general has limited the analysis to those cases considered "unwanted", leaving very few spaces to understand other "types" of it. Through the use of qualitative methods with 10 young women and some of the relevant actors around them, the study analyzes the exercise of their situated agency, giving special emphasis to how gender inequality is normalized in their culture and material scarcity create a very constrained environment for them.

The research findings point out that young women do exercise their agency in several ways, but as it is constrained by a structure that has very strong forces that in general do not permit that their actions change the status quo. The investigation identifies the need to tackle structural problems such as poverty, inequality and social exclusion in order to start generating real alternatives where young people can choose.

## **Relevance for Development Studies**

The study examines the factors that influence young motherhood in low-socioeconomic contexts in Colombia, giving special attention to the illustration of the conditions of poverty and gender inequality – two of the key aspects of Development Studies - in which young women live. Likewise, the study concludes that only by changing structural problems in the Colombian society such as poverty, inequality and social exclusion there will be real alternatives of life for young people, which translate in the decrease of young motherhood.

## **Keywords**

Young motherhood, agency, poverty, gender, life plans

## Introduction

*“In the end, the major issue surrounding youth agency and social structure is how best to maximize the range of meaningful choices available to young people” (White and Wyn 1998: 326).*

Teenage pregnancy is a phenomenon that has been extensively studied and debated by government, researchers and the media around the world. The discussions around it have been focused on the very significant levels that it has reached in multiple countries in the recent decades. It is estimated that 25% of the women in Latin America and the Caribbean are mothers before turning 20 (UNFPA 2014: 9) and that in Colombia 19.5% of women between 15 and 19 years old have been pregnant (Galindo Pardo 2012: 135).

In Colombia, most of the research has examined the consequences of teenage pregnancy for the life of the young mother and her child, especially in terms of education years and future income. It also has given importance to the analysis of the factors or determinants that influence the phenomenon, such as family, community and national institutions (authors such as Flórez and Soto 2013, and Galindo 2012). In spite of this progress, public policy in Colombia still focuses its strategy to decrease teenage pregnancy on changing young women’s behavior through sexual education and sexual and reproductive services, and fails to recognize the complex and constrained structure in which they are embedded. Likewise, research, policy and practice in Colombia has had the tendency to limit the analysis of teenage pregnancy to those cases considered “unwanted”, leaving very few space to understand other “types” of it.

The purpose of my research is to re-think teenage pregnancy taking into account these two unexplored aspects. The study presents the voices of 10 young mothers from low-socioeconomic levels in Cartagena, Colombia, and analyzes the exercise of their situated agency. It illustrates several factors from different levels of the ecological framework, such as family, community and national context, and it gives special emphasis to the analysis of how gender inequality and poverty create a very constraint environment for them. In the same line, the study looks to move forward from the homogenized idea of teenage pregnancy as an “unwanted” event for young mothers and/or their partners to recognize that it is part of a complex decision-making process with diverse nuances that travel between the conceptions of “wanted” and “unwanted”.

Finally, the investigation aims to settle some suggestions about how the different efforts around the phenomenon should be redirected with the objective of creating real alternatives of life where young people can choose.

# 1. Travelling the framings of teenage pregnancy

## 1.1. Previous efforts to study teenage pregnancy

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 95% of the adolescent births in the world occur in developing countries. These are 7.3 million girls under the age of 18, which represent around 19% of the young women in these states (UNFPA 2013: iv). The UN agency focuses attention on its negative impact on health, education and productivity. Health concerns include the fact that girls below 15 years old face the greatest risk of maternal death; the risk is significantly less for young women above the age (Ibid.).

Teenage pregnancy is associated to the “interruption or termination of formal education”, which has an economic impact that leads to “exclusion from paid employment or livelihoods, additional costs to the health sector and the loss of human capital” (Op. Cit.: 18). The World Bank travels in the same direction stating “different studies have established a significant correlation between early motherhood, lower educational achievement, and poorer labor market outcomes for women” (World Bank 2012: 10).

Latin America and Colombia have not been an exception in analyzing the situation through the same lens and therefore defining it as a primary concern. In Colombia, the phenomenon follow-up has been mostly done by Profamilia: a private organization specialized in sexual and reproductive health. Profamilia has been doing a Survey of Demography and Health (ENDS, because of its acronym in Spanish) since 1990, where different variables around young sexuality and pregnancy are measured. Predominantly based on this survey, numerous authors have examined the situation in the country, generally pointing out its damaging consequences. Colombian researchers sustain that teenage pregnancy has a negative effect on the number of education years of the young mothers, labor participation and their future family structure (they have the tendency to have more children than other women). The less human capital accumulation “stops them from getting out of the poverty trap and increases inequality” (Galindo Pardo 2012, based on Gaviria 2000, Barrera e Higuera 2004 and Flórez et al 2004).

The discussion has also included the analysis of the factors that influence teenage pregnancy using an ecological perspective<sup>1</sup>. These factors have been classified in individual, interpersonal and contextual. On the individual level, an in-depth analysis of the ENDS by Flórez and Soto (2013) establishes that there is an important correlation between education and teenage pregnancy: “teenage pregnancy decreases with a greater education level and school attendance” (2013: 30). Likewise, these authors highlight that a “nuclear home” and a home with an “educational atmosphere” have been identified as protective factors in the

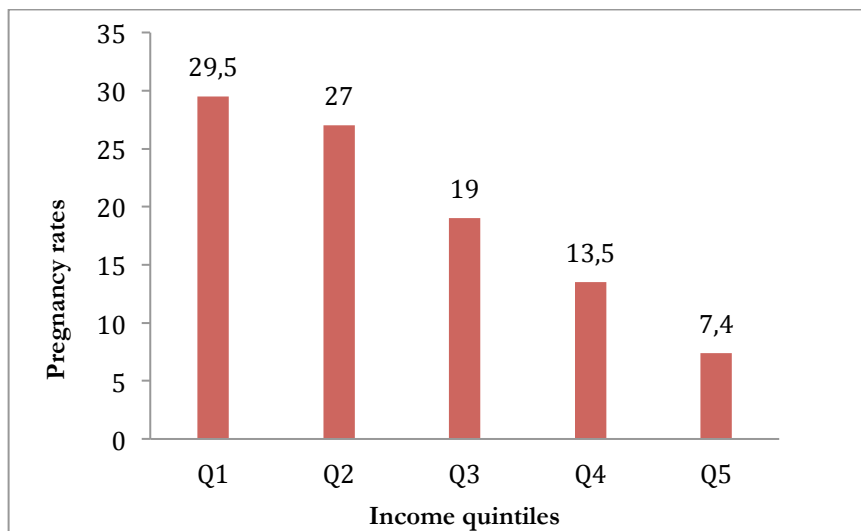
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<sup>1</sup> More details will be presented in section 3.4

surveys since 1990, which means that they contribute to preventing teenage pregnancy (Op. Cit. 37).

Poverty has not only been analyzed as a consequence of teenage pregnancy, but as a factor that influences it. Even though the phenomenon can also be found in higher and medium socio-economic levels, the available data shows there is definitely a relation between teenage pregnancy and poverty since 29.5% of the girls in the poorest quintile are young mothers, while just the 7.4% in the richest quintile are. The following table illustrates the situation:

**Illustration 2. Proportion of 15 to 19 year old mothers by socio-economic level (Income Quintiles) - 2010**



Source: The author based on Flórez and Soto (2013)

## 1.2. Limited analyses of the phenomenon: focus on individual characteristics of young women and “unwanted” pregnancy

“Many of the actions – before and since 1994- to achieve the objectives of reducing the number of adolescent pregnancies have been narrowly focused, targeting girls as the problem and aiming to change their behavior as the solution”<sup>2</sup> (UNFPA 2013: 32). This means that in past analyses in Colombia and the world there has not been enough acknowledgement of the different contexts where the young women are embedded and the diverse actors that are part of them, and in this way there was a characterization of the factors that influence the phenomenon just in the individual level of the young women.

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<sup>2</sup> 1994 was the year of the International Conference of Population and Development (ICPD), where the majority of countries of the world agreed on giving priority to the decrease of teenage pregnancy.



There has been a gradual shift from this limited view to more comprehensive approaches, where the ecological model emerged. What makes this approach so relevant and appropriate is that it is “one that takes into account the full range of complex drivers of adolescent pregnancy and the interplay of these factors” (Ibid.).

In spite of the previous explanation, the actions directed to decrease teenage pregnancy in Colombia have been mostly based on factors of the individual level, such as knowledge and attitudes towards contraception, and on the contextual level, mainly education and services on sexual and reproductive health (Vargas Trujillo, Henao y González, 2004; Flórez et ál., 2004, cited by (Flórez, Soto 2013: 10). In this way, some analyses suggest that socio-cultural factors have not been sufficiently taken into account in the definition of interventions to decline the phenomenon (Ibid). In line with this, Hernández (2003: 1) mentions, “the ‘information’ about reproductive sexuality and family planning methods given to young people through national campaigns and programs, has not transformed their sexual exercise, and the teenage pregnancy rate continues increasing” (2003: 1). The author attributes this situation to the “decontextualized conception” of young sexuality in the general study of the phenomenon (Ibid).

On the other hand, the mainstream study of the phenomenon has been narrowly focused on “unwanted” or “unplanned” teenage pregnancy, as a situation that the future mother or couple were not expecting. For example, the UNFPA defines itself as “the lead UN agency for delivering a world where *every pregnancy is wanted*, every birth is safe, and every young person’s potential is fulfilled” (UNFPA home page 2015), which suggests the assumption that the “problem” are the “unwanted” cases and the other types of the phenomenon are not taken into account. Likewise, in the Colombian context, the Document of the National Council of Economic and Social Policy (CONPES) No. 147, which defines the guidelines of the national strategy to prevent teenage pregnancy, establishes the purpose of preventing teenage pregnancy focusing in three characteristics of the situation, where one is “unplanned pregnancy” (Consejo Nacional de Política Económica y Social República de Colombia 2012: 2).

This conception has tended to homogenize teenage pregnancy as one-type phenomenon, leaving insufficient space for the analysis of cases in which there has been some level of “wanting”, “planning” or “choosing” to have a baby from the young women or the couple. In this way, the prevention policy and programs have left out multiple nuances and expressions of teenage pregnancy that exist in the country, limiting the understanding of the phenomenon.

It is important to realize that there has been some attempt to inquire other expressions of the phenomenon outside the “unwanted” conception. In general terms, these have been referred to as cases of “wanted” teenage pregnancy. To start, the ENDS includes the

measurement of “wanted pregnancy” in its questions. Galindo (2012: 146), based on the survey 2010, affirms that “wanted” teenage pregnancy represents 36.1% of the total cases of teenage pregnancy, and 38.9% in the poorest quintile<sup>3</sup> (Galindo Pardo 2012: 146). These data show that even though it hasn’t received the sufficient attention yet, the phenomenon is very common in the country. In the same line, some members of the government and researchers as the current Minister of Health have expressed their awareness about it. “A big part of the teenage pregnancy cases are due to decisions of the young women themselves and not to lack of awareness of the use of contraceptive methods and practices” (El Tiempo 2012).

Some studies in Colombia have tried to identify the causes of “wanted” teenage pregnancy. They have suggested that part of the explanation is in the view that teenagers have about their perspectives or options in their lives. For example, Galindo (2012) mentions “the poorest teenagers associate pregnancy to a life alternative that, besides giving adult status and access to possible benefits, can be more favorable in the short term compared to other alternatives like staying in the education system” (2012: 141).

Studies in the United States about Latina teenager’s fertility adds to this, establishing that factors of teenage pregnancy such as “lower socioeconomic status” and “having low educational aspirations” are related to favorable attitudes about early motherhood (Rocca, Doherty et al. 2010: 186). UNFPA (2014) explains that “being a mother is presented as the closest possibility to obtain economic, social and affective security, to establish a couple union and consolidate a home that allows them to become independent from their origin families (...) Additionally, they fulfill the gender expectations and demands, those that assume that reproduction and care is an unavoidable commitment of women” (UNFPA 2014: 14).

Studies from other parts of the world have identified that family backgrounds have a very relevant influence in young women’s decision-making about pregnancy. Coleman and Cater (2006) interviewed 41 young girls from disadvantaged backgrounds in England and found that some of the reported factors to “plan” a pregnancy are having an “unsettled and volatile background”, which means families who have experiences of separation or “poor family relationships” in general (2006: 601). The same authors also identified that the social context where the young women lived was determinant for their decision. Living in neighborhoods where being a young mother and housewife was very common was an important factor for taking the decision of getting pregnant (2006: 602).

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<sup>3</sup> These data is based on the teenagers that in the moment of the survey reported that their pregnancy was “wanted” or “desired”. If they report that they wanted to get pregnant later o they didn’t want the baby at all, their cases are classified as “unwanted” pregnancy.

The discussed studies have already started to move forward the narrow view of “unwanted” pregnancy, which is an important step in the study of the phenomenon. However, recognizing that there are other expressions of young motherhood apart from “unwanted” should not mean just analyzing the cases of “wanted” pregnancy because none of these two categories capture the complexities of the phenomenon; instead, the discussion should go beyond these two categories and explore in detail the different nuances that young women experience with their early pregnancy. The next section explains how the study starts to work in this direction.

### 1.3. Re-thinking teenage pregnancy

Taking into account how teenage pregnancy has been framed and studied, my research aims to *re-think* the phenomenon in different aspects.

As “teenage pregnancy” has been the term used by the dominant discourse to frame it just as a major social problem, as an “unwanted” event for the mother or couple, I choose to use a different one. Drawing from Mulongo’s explanation (2006) of the pejorative meaning of this term, I will address the topic from new lenses as a “conscious attempt to suggest an alternative way of thinking about them” (the phenomenon) (2006: 3). I will use the term “young motherhood” based on this argument and also acknowledging that my study aims to understand motherhood as a process that includes different stages. These are: the time before the young women get pregnant, the months of their pregnancy and when their babies are born.

The following are the four main ways in which I *re-think* young motherhood:

- 1) Understanding the types of young motherhood more diverse than “unwanted” cases, and recognizing and illustrating that “unwanted” and “wanted” are not black and white categories, but that young motherhood in contexts of material deprivation is a phenomenon that presents multiple nuances.
- 2) Giving more space to the analysis of culture as a key factor that influences young motherhood, especially in terms of the patriarchal system and gender relations that shape it.
- 3) Re- considering the “responsibility” of poverty in the situation, in terms of illustrating how it defines a constraint context for young people. This includes re-analyzing the concept of “life plan”: how it has been conceptualized by a modern discourse, how it dictates how young people should develop their lives and if it is really possible to put it in practice in poverty contexts.
- 4) Bringing men into the conversation: how are they part of the culture, institutions and structures in society that shape a patriarchal context; and how they participate in the phenomenon as partners of the young women and/or fathers of the children.

This specially taking into account that “men invisibility” has been a continuum in reproductive health indicators in Colombia, which reinforces the message that they are not part or responsible in the situation (Jiménez, Aliaga y Rodríguez (2011) in Flórez and Soto 2013: 15).

The examination of these four matters will be developed through two transversal elements. First, giving priority to young women’s stories and voices in the research; and two, guiding the paper through the discussion of the Agency vs. Structure debate.

White and Wyn (1998) suggest that in order to have a deep understanding of the interplay between agency and structure in young people’s lives, it is necessary to get to know the full view of their context. “We must attempt to understand the way in which different groups of young people are situated within the local community, group or school, and how these relationships are, in turn, shaped by wider processes and social division associated with the dominant mode of production and power relations in society” (1998: 325). In this sense, the paper discusses what are the most powerful factors from the context and how young women (and young men’s, in some cases) exercise their constrained agency in their decision-making or “choosing” processes around having a baby.

I strongly believe this “new reading” of the phenomenon will contribute to new discussions of the phenomenon that hopefully will reach some of the key actors around young motherhood in Colombia – governments, policy makers, NGO or academics– to see young motherhood from new lenses.

#### **1.4. Organization of the paper**

In the second chapter, I present the research questions and methodology, which include explanations about the research site, participants, ethical issues, positionality and data collection and analysis. After this, in chapter three I introduce the key theoretical concepts of the study such as youth, young motherhood, agency and the ecological framework. The fourth and most important section of the paper analyzes the key findings of my fieldwork, with special emphasis on the cultural and material context of the participants. Finally, in the fifth section I present some relevant examples of how young women exercise their constrained agency and analyze in what conditions they are taking decisions around their sexuality and reproduction. Chapter six is the conclusion of the paper, which includes some suggestions about how the different efforts around the phenomenon should be redirected in order to create real alternatives of life where young people can choose.

## 2. Setting the research

### 2.1. Research questions

The research question that guides my study is:

*Why are some Colombian young women from low socioeconomic contexts “choosing” to be young mothers?*

The sub-questions are:

*What are the family and cultural contexts in which young women “choose” motherhood?*

*How do ideals of womanhood, manhood and motherhood in the context influence the phenomenon of young motherhood?*

*How do the relationships with men (their fathers and their boyfriends/partners) influence the decision-making process of young motherhood?*

*How does the socioeconomic context shape “choosing” young motherhood?*

### 2.2. Research site: Cartagena and foundation “Juan Felipe Gómez Escobar (JFGE)”

My fieldwork was developed at the JFGE organization, which is located in the city of Cartagena, Colombia a medium-size city that attracts millions of tourists every year, but it also presents high levels of poverty that strongly contrast with the touristic scene. The latter has an economy based on tourism and on the industrial and port sectors (OLCB 2011). Cartagena presents the highest level of informal employment among the principal cities in the country, with a rate of 55% (CCV 2013). The city has a Gini coefficient of 0.475 and a poverty incidence of 29.2% (Op. cit).

In relation to young motherhood, 21.3% of women from 15 to 19 years old have been pregnant in Bolívar, Cartagena’s region (Profamilia 2010: 123), which is significantly more than the national average. According to CCV, almost 4.000 young women got pregnant in 2013; 96.3% of them were between 15 and 19 years old, and 3.7% were between 10 and 14 years old.

The organization focuses attention on young mothers and early childhood since the year 2001. Their main objectives are to reduce child mortality and train young mothers in technical courses (vocational education) such as logistics, hotel services and jewelry manufacture so that they can enter the labor market. The attention includes psychosocial support for the young mothers. The organization is currently working with more than 300 of

them, where around half is pregnant and the rest already have their children. The organization is one of the largest in Colombia in terms of the number of beneficiaries and the support they give to them, and it is highly recognized because of the exceptional treatment they give to the young mothers and their accountability processes to donors and the government.

### **2.3. Methods and participants**

As studies in Colombia around young motherhood are mostly based on quantitative analysis, my study prioritizes qualitative research methods with the aim of exploring in depth the “why’s” and “how’s” and lived experiences of young motherhood. Likewise, it gives special attention to the stories of the young women that participated in the research, while triangulating their narratives with the views of other stakeholders (psychosocial staff and one of the young mother’s partners), as well as a review of empirical studies on young motherhood.

I visited the organization every day for three weeks, between the last week of July and the first two weeks of August 2015. I started my study with a focus group discussion with 13 young mothers as my participants with the objectives of having an initial approach to them and to discuss general topics around their experiences as young mothers. The participants were selected by the organization based on the following characteristics that I suggested, plus their availability in the moment of my visit:

- They were less than 19 years old when they got pregnant
- Their babies were between one and three years old
- They had a variety of education levels, family structure and situation, and relationship status

The participants of the focus group were not selected under the premise of their pregnancies being “wanted” or “unwanted”. Only the criteria listed above were used, with the aim of teasing out different “types” and nuances of young motherhood in the group.

Then I did semi-structured interviews to three different type of participants: (i) four members of the psychosocial staff of the organization, (ii) 10 young mothers (five that participated in the focus group and five additional), and (iii) one young father, partner of one of the interviewed mothers. The members of the psychosocial team interviewed were two psychologists and two social workers. The objectives of the latter were to ask them about the young mothers’ decision-making process around pregnancy and getting to know their views about the young mothers – how they frame them and their position about the phenomenon in general.

The young mothers were selected as follows: five of them were part of the initial focus group discussion; they expressed different nuances in their decision-making process about becoming mothers and were willing to share their stories. The other five young women were invited to participate based on the conversations with the psychosocial team and the revision of the files of the initial assessments that they do to the mothers when they arrive to the organization. Three of them were selected because their file said that they “planned” their pregnancy and the other two because the staff pointed out their openness and willingness to participate. All of them were 18 years old or older during the research and they were between 16 and 18 years old when they got pregnant.

Finally, the interview with the young father was done with the purpose of listening to the male perspective of the situation. Although I invited more partners to the study, it was only possible to talk to one of them. The rest argued that they didn't have time and/or they were too shy to participate.

Both the focus group discussion and the interviews were developed in the organization.

### **Ethical concerns of the research**

As the investigation involves topics that could be very emotional for the participants, I was very careful to prepare the guides of the interviews in order to flow as the rapport was developed during the conversation. Even when most of the participants were invited by a person from the psychosocial team to join the study, I always asked them for oral consent and for permission to audiotape the dialogues. Likewise, I informed them that they could abstain from answering any specific question or they could stop the conversation if they were feeling uncomfortable. This situation never occurred, so the focus group discussion and all the 15 interviews (in total) were finished and completely audiotaped.

In addition, I considered important to notify the participants that their real names were not going to be used in the study. They have been replaced by different names to protect their identity.

### **Recalling experiences**

A significant part of the interviews were the tales of the young mothers about their lives on multiple aspects before getting pregnant. This means that they were recalling experiences and events that happened around two or three years ago. Therefore, it is important to consider that these recalling processes might involve some characteristics that must be taken into account. In their study, Reavy and Brown (2009) discuss how social remembering and memory processes happen in the context of adult women survivors of child sexual abuse. They do a revision of the “memory studies” field and get to the conclusion that “the notion

of memory is not a passive faculty of recording as storing the past (a 'reproductive' notion of memory), but rather an active process in which persons engage to make sense of the own personal and collective histories (a 'reconstructive' notion of memory)" (2009: 466). In line with this and based on their analysis of 10 semi-structured interviews with women that have been abused in their childhood, the authors suggest that there are ambivalences in their participants' stories, which are partially explained by their need to "make sense", to present a "coherent" story. In this process, comes out the way they see themselves practicing their agency or not, for instance explaining why they did not make use of it.

Even if the contexts of the studies are different and clearly Reavy and Brown's (2009) study in general involves recalling processes of much traumatic experiences, their analysis is helpful for me to consider how the young participants of my research might have similar behaviours in the interviews, not to underestimate their narratives, but to be aware that they might include the outcome of internal negotiations that are common in memory processes.

## **2.4. Reflecting on my position as a researcher**

Between conversations with participants of my study I had different chances to reflect on my fieldwork, especially on my position as a researcher. Having recently learnt about the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, one issue that was a constant thought in my mind was that I did not want to be an "extractive" researcher. I did not want to be part of the "commodification of human phenomena" that Fals Borda illustrates (2001: 30), but instead, and taking into account my time limitations, I wanted to listen to people's stories, especially the young mothers'. After returning from fieldwork, I realized that in a way I achieved my objective, but there were still many aspects that created power relations between the young mothers and me.

To start, my physical image established differences between us, being our clothes one of the most distinctive. As Rowe (2014: 406) analyses in the context of her fieldwork in women's prisons, clothes and in particular, civilian clothes, play a role in the identity of the researcher. The young mothers had to wear a uniform: purple pants and white shirt for those who were pregnant, and pink pants and white shirt for those who had given birth already. Likewise, the staff of the organization of all levels (except the general director) wore a uniform. Me, on the contrary, visited the organization in civilian clothes, which made it evident that I was not part of neither of these two groups. The only people that did not wear a uniform were the volunteers that worked as teachers or supporting the psychosocial team in their paper work; in this way, it was very common for the young mothers to confuse me with one of them, which was evident when they called me "miss" or "teacher". By this situation, I could tell that there was some hierarchy between us.



During my visit to the organization I was usually introduced to the young mothers by one of the members of the psychosocial team, which showed that I was a close person to the staff. I realize that created some pressure to the mothers to participate in my study. Although I always told them that their participation was totally voluntary, I knew that agreeing to be part of the study could be used as a means to ingratiate themselves with the staff of the foundation. In the same line, when meeting the young mothers I gave a detailed explanation of who I was and what was the purpose of my visit including the fact that I was a graduate student, which made clear that I was in an education level significantly higher than them.

I strongly believe that other of my characteristics helped to “reduce” these power relations between us. I can certainly state that being a woman and being just a few years older than them were key features to build an environment where they felt safe and free to share their experiences.

Another issue that was continuously part of my reflecting process was what Berger (2015: 20) states as one of the key purposes of reflexivity, to “carefully self monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on their research”. During all the research process, I struggled (and still do) to recognize our different positions on age and which one is the “appropriate” one to be a mother. For example, some of the young mothers asked me during or after the interviews “are you a mother?” and after my answer “no” came an “oh, how old are you?” and after I said “28” came a worried face. On one hand, I identified this situation as one of the key findings of the study: age and motherhood are intrinsically related, their relationship is defined by social norms and in the case of the mothers of the study, the “normal” trend is to be a mother maximum in the early twenties<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, even if I cannot say I have a defined position on the subject, it was a way to gain awareness that we had different conceptions of what is the “right” age to become a mother and that I had to be careful in the way I manage my personal views within the research.

## **2.5. Data organization and analysis**

During the fieldwork I transcribed the recordings of the focus group discussion and of the interviews with the psychosocial staff. These documents were in Spanish. Later, I carefully listened again to the records of the rest of the interviews and constructed an excel matrix in English based on the transcriptions and recordings. I organized the information according to key themes and selected the most relevant quotes per theme. The latter will be presented in the same way that the participants expressed them, even if there are some mistakes in the composition of the sentences.

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<sup>4</sup> This point is broadly developed in following chapters.

After having ready the matrix, the data analysis was done by manually identifying patterns and significant trends. As it was planned, the sub-questions defined for the research were a fundamental guide in this process.

### **3. Introducing conceptualizations of Youth and the “Agency-Structure” debate**

This chapter introduces the discussion of key concepts and debates that are present through all the paper. Nonetheless, there are discussions of other relevant concepts in other chapters of the document, specially four and five.

#### **3.1. Youth as a social construction**

Youth is a social group that has special protagonism inside development studies. There have been multiple attempts to categorize young people, to define them as a group with homogeneous characteristics (Gigengack et al. 2014). This conceptualization comes from the ruling of age-normativity specially driven by multilateral organizations, in particular by The Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which defines anyone under 18 years old as a child. In spite of the powerful discourse that considers youth as a “universal” classification, various authors have claimed the heterogeneity of this social group (White and Wyn 1998: 318). My study is in line with the idea that “growing up is a gendered, classed and ‘raced’ experience, in which the outcomes are far from equal” (Ibid); in this way, young people have different attitudes, reactions and behaviours according to the intersection of their characteristics. Moreover, based on the theories of historians of childhood and youth, Lesko (1996) argues that different historical processes construct young people. Therefore, “adolescence can be seen as the effects of certain sets of social practices across numerous domains of contemporary legal, educational, family and medical domains” (Lesko 1996: 140, based on Walkerdine 1990).

It is especially interesting how young people have been defined as both agents of hope and concern, as “makers and breakers” at the same time, as the title of the book edited by Honwana and De Boeck (2005) suggests. There is the construction of youth as “the future”, “the next generation”, settled by multiple actors like governments, NGOs and academia (Gigengack et al. 2014), which has placed excessive responsibility on their hands. On the other side, there is an image that portrays them as dangerous for society. Comaroff and Comaroff (2005) explain it in their research on Africa: “Juveniles are also the creatures of our nightmares, of our social impossibilities and our existential angst” (2005: 20).

The first view is particularly related to the concept of “youth transitions”. According to White and Wyn (1998), the latter is a tradition that is part of the voluntaristic approach to youth, and in this way it defines that “the transition depends on people’s individual choices” (1998: 321). It establishes that young people should “fulfil educational goals, become economically self-sufficient, and develop and maintain affirming social relationships” (Xie et al. 2014: 29). In this line of thought, every young person is valued by the skills that they are able to develop that later will enable them to find a place in the labour market. This vision will be questioned in following chapters of the paper.

The second view is principally based on what has been called “risk-taking behaviour”. It comes from the assumption that youth is a “linear process of development” that should lead to a “normal” adult life. If it does not, the person is considered as “deviant” (White and Wyn 1998: 319). Two of the most examined of these behaviours in children and youth studies are criminal behaviour and “teenage pregnancy”. The next section will illustrate in more detail the second one.

### **3.2. Young motherhood**

Gigengack et al. (2014) affirm that because of chronological age, young people have been “excluded from participating (fully) in various spheres of the adult world, including work, political office and marriage, until they have reached a specified chronological age” (2014: 166, based on Melchiorre 2004). Motherhood is also one of these spheres. In line with the developmental approach, young motherhood breaks with the socially accepted notion that childbearing is for adults, not for “children”; thus, “these women are seen as psychologically immature and inadequate as parents” (Mulongo 2006: 2).

As previously mentioned, young motherhood has been referred as “teenage pregnancy” in the mainstream research worldwide and in Colombia. It has been labelled as a major social problem and therefore a big obstacle for development. As Duncan et al. (2010) affirm “there is the construction of teenage mothering as a uniformly negative experience for the mothers themselves, their children and for society as a whole” (Duncan et al. 2010: 3). According to Llanes (2012), young motherhood has been constructed by “hegemonic discourses” about fertility regulation and universal ideas of motherhood and family (2012: 236). In line with the latter, research and public policy in the United States and the United Kingdom has permeated the discussions around the topic in Latin America. Some of the most common have been “assumptions that young women become mothers to receive welfare benefits, that teenage parenthood is the outcome of sexual promiscuity, or that teen mothers are typically irresponsible or indifferent parents” (Furstenberg 2007: 4). The phenomenon has also been associated to “family breakdown”, meaning that young mothers are the product of families where lack of affection, irresponsibility and even violence are protagonists. While the present study does not concur with the moral stereotype of “family breakdown”, family

characteristics and behaviour are considered as a very relevant influence in young women's lives.

Aside from the conceptualization of young motherhood as just a social problem, there are other streams of thought that have studied the phenomenon acknowledging different sides of it. Sociological and anthropological perspectives have introduced the idea of examining young motherhood as a subjective experience (Llanes 2012: 240). This view recognizes the need to listen directly to what young women have to say about their experiences and to see them as "subjects that construct meanings and in spite of social and economic constraints, they are able to take decisions, construct, negotiate and reconfigure new identities as mothers and adolescents" (Ibid). This conceptualization goes in line with the purposes of the study. However, the research attempts to question if the young mothers can take decisions that actually transform their lives, or if they just negotiate inside the perpetuation of the status quo.

### **3.3. The "Agency-Structure" debate**

The Agency-Structure debate is the principal conceptual framework that serves as lenses to analyse the findings of the research. Knio (2013) illustrates that this debate "is par excellence an ontological question whose thematic contours oscillate between context and conduct, nature and nurture, determinism and voluntarism, fatalism and intentionalism" (2013: 857). Thus, multiple authors have tried to define agency and its interaction with structure. In her research about women's empowerment, Kabeer (1999) defines it as "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them" (1999: 438). For their part, White and Wyn (1998) analyse the debate around sociological studies of youth and establish their own definition of agency as "the exercise of will and conscious action on the part of human subjects" (1998: 315).

White and Wyn (1998) illustrate that there have been three principal "branches" inside youth studies that have analysed agency and its relation to structure: the deterministic, voluntaristic and contextual. The first two (1998: 317) have age-normativity as their starting point, which means that they "both draw on a static, unidimensional approach in which youth is understood as primarily and age category" (Op. Cit. 318). The deterministic approach is based on the supposition that youth is a "linear process" of development and in this sense is "largely predetermined by psychological and physical processes" (White and Wyn 1998: 319); thus, this approach tends to undermine the exercise of agency. On the other hand and as stated before, the voluntaristic approach is rooted in the belief of the transitional process from youth to adulthood and how it depends on individual choices; in this way. "The emphasis on individual choice tends to render structural constraints and processes of social division in society as either quite invisible or as inevitable and irrelevant" (Op. Cit. 321). Therefore, this view usually exaggerates the power of agency.

Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) suggest that Giddens' structuration theory gives very valuable elements to stop the "battle" between voluntarism and determinism: "by seeing structure and agency as being brought into action simultaneously, Giddens explained social life as being continually produced and reproduced through a process of structuration (...) both structure and agency were implicated in every moment of social interaction" (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011: 215). Giddens' theorem of the "duality of structure" defines that "the constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality" (1984: 25). This duality "suggests that individuals create structures, and then structures produce individuals iteratively across time. While structures constrain and enable our activities, they are not given but are inter-subjectively constructed" (Knio 2013: 858). The study goes in line with Giddens' perspective. In this way, it does not pretend to separate agency from structure, but to identify that young people take decisions while they are embedded in a context with particular characteristics. In turn, this view is similar to what White and Wyn (1998) call "contextual" and Okwany (2015) establishes as "situated" or "constrained" agency. The latter is settled as "the repercussion of social location (...) and the discourses within which their personhood in embedded" (Okwany 2015: 6).

For Kabeer (1999), the exercise of agency can happen in different ways: "It can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis" (1999: 438). Drawing on Katz (2004), Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010) add that resilience is another way in which agency is exercised, as it is made-up by "small acts of 'getting by' that help individuals and groups cope with everyday realities but do not change existing social relations" (2011: 216). Several of the young mothers that participated in the study practiced these different ways of agency. The following chapters will illustrate and analyse them.

White and Wyn (1998) deepen in the discussion of how to exercise agency to resist social structure. They recognize that young people have the capacity to challenge certain social structures and it is a contextualized approach the one that identifies the power relations that shape society. "Such exposures are essential to raising consciousness about relationships and issues, and to the further development of emancipatory projects involving young people and those who work with young people" (1998: 324, based on Taylor 1993). These author's ideas will be taking into account in the concluding remarks of the paper, when the relationship of young agency and structural social change is discussed.

### **3.4. The Ecological Model**

The UNFPA uses the Ecological Model for their analysis of young motherhood, identifying five main levels: (i) National, (ii) Community, (iii) School/peers, (iv) Family, and (v) Individual. At the national level there are key factors such as policy and laws that limit access

to sexual and reproductive health; in the community level stand out the “norms, beliefs and attitudes” (UNFPA 2013: 35) about young sexuality, teenage pregnancy, contraception use, among others. For example in some communities “motherhood may be seen as ‘what girls are for’, and their social value comes from their capacity to produce children” (Presler-Marshall and Jones, 2012; Edin and Kefalas, n.d., cited by (UNFPA 2013: 37). The third level takes into account the factors around education and peers, where access to education in general and to comprehensive sexual education is analyzed. Multiple authors have discussed education as a “protective factor” (UNFPA 2013: 42); (Flórez, Soto 2013: 30) illustrating how teenage pregnancy decreases with more school years. This level also includes the influence of peers and partners. The latter has a crucial effect on young women’s behavior around sexuality, in particular around the use or not of contraception.

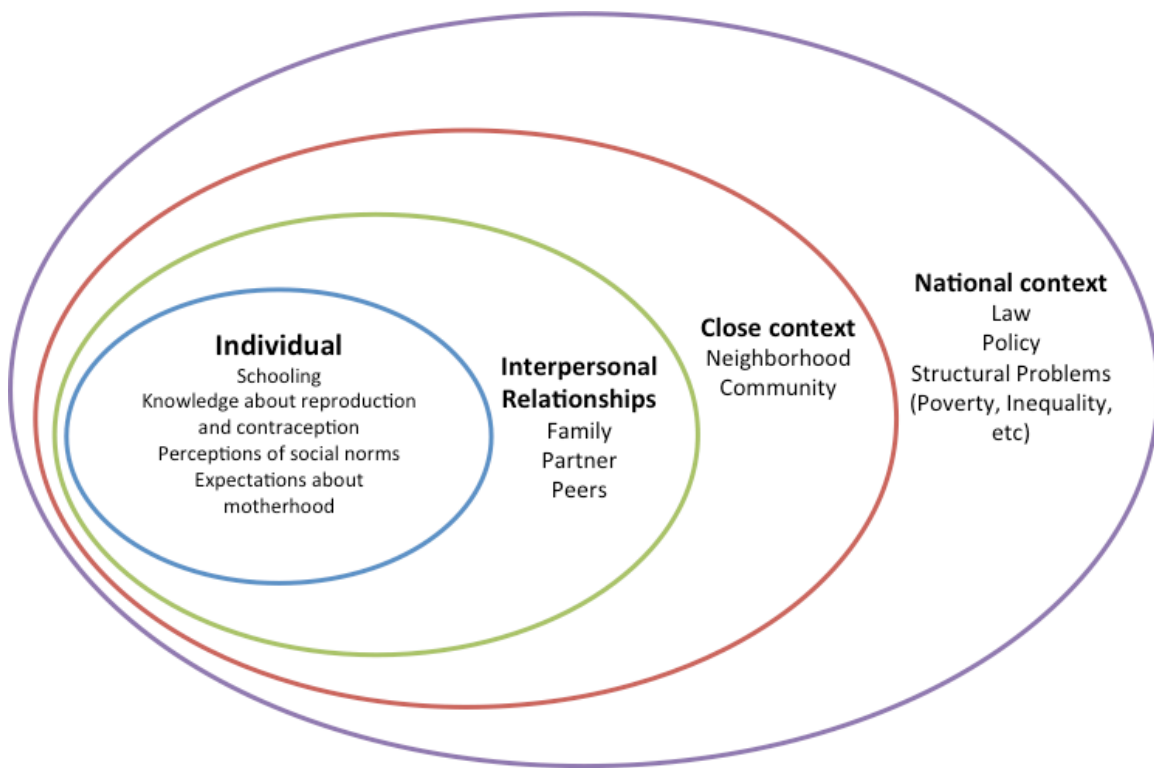
Family-level determinants involve: among others, “the stability and cohesiveness of the family; the degree to which there is violence or conflict in the home; the extent of household poverty or wealth; the presence of role models; and the reproductive history of parents” (UNFPA 2013: 47). Finally, the individual level factors in general terms refer to the characteristics of the young woman in terms of her health, attitudes, expectations and behaviors, where is important to highlight her way to respond to social norms and her expectations about romantic relations, sex and maternity. Certainly, the best attribute of the ecological model is how it makes possible to show “that adolescent pregnancies do not occur in a vacuum but are the consequence of an interlocking set of factors” (UNFPA 2013: vii).

For the examination of the phenomenon in Colombia, Flórez and Soto(2013)use a similar model but they define just three levels of factors: (i) Contextual factors, (ii) Interpersonal factors, and (iii) Intrapersonal factors. The main differences with the model defined by UNFPA are that first, the national and community levels for the latter are reunited in the first category for the Colombian authors; and second, the influence of family, partner and peers are all part of the “interpersonal factors”.

Flórez and Soto highlight that is possible to classify the factors in “protective” or “risk” factor, no matter in what level they are (Flórez, Soto 2013: 15). Moreover, the “balance” between these is the one that defines the “vulnerability” around teenage pregnancy, which means “the probability to have a negative result from exposure to a combination of risk factors, due to the inability of the person to deal with them” (Vargas 2010 and DNP 2012, cited by Flórez and Soto 2010: 15).

The holistic view that the Ecological Model gives is another of the key lenses of the study. It will guide the analysis of the different factors that influence young motherhood. I define my own adaptation of the model based on UNFPA, Flórez and Soto (2010) and my own knowledge developed during the study, especially during fieldwork. It is presented as follows:

## Illustration 2. Adaptation of the Ecological Model



**Source:** Based on UNFPA (2013), and Flórez and Soto (2010)

## 4. The power of structure: cultural and material contexts

When I first arrived at the organization in Cartagena, I was looking for those cases different from the “unwanted” typical conception; which I thought were cases of young women that “wanted” or “planned” their pregnancies. Unexpectedly, after a few hours of my first day in fieldwork, I realized that it was not evident which ones were the cases of “wanted” and which ones were the cases of “unwanted” motherhood. The only thing that was clear was that the majority of young women had stories full of complexities “in the middle” of these two conceptions. All of them involved decision-making at different moments of the process of becoming a mother.

After the in-depth interviews, the panorama was more comprehensible. I identified two key phenomena around young motherhood. There were three cases in which the young mothers explicitly said that they looked for the pregnancy; I identified these cases as “clear-cut” cases of “wanted” motherhood. On the other hand, the majority of the interviewees expressed a

different story, which in the beginning seemed to be the popular story of “unwanted” pregnancy that has been largely studied in Colombia, but then turned out to be a story with different shades of “wanting” and “choosing”. Both perspectives will be discussed as follows.

The three first cases shared key characteristics: all of them were in stable relationships, were living with their partners before getting pregnant and took the decision of having a baby with them. The age difference with their partners was between 1 and 4 years. Likewise, they all finished high school and were not developing any kind of study or job when they got pregnant. Their partners finished high school as well and they were currently working. About family relationships, draws attention that all of them lived with both of their parents before living with their partners and had good relationships with them. The following are some expressions that stand out from the interviews with these young mothers:

*“My daughter was planned, we already wanted to have a child”* (Juliana, 19 year old mother)

My question: *“Do you considered your pregnancy wanted?”*

Mandy: *“Yes, because when I got pregnant I was already living with my partner, we already had four or five months living together, we were desiring a child from us(...) because sometimes we felt alone because we were just the two of us...and I wasn't doing anything...because you know, the semester was postponed and I had to wait to get in the university”* (19 year old mother)

*“I always used to say I want my child to have someone to entertain with, even though when they grow up they go and leave you alone...I want to have a daughter to live with her her childhood, play with her”* (Juliana, 19 year old mother).

The other group of young mothers shared the following story: in general they didn't use contraception, even though they stated their acknowledgment of the risk of getting pregnant when having sex under these conditions. In the interviews they showed ambivalence about taking the decision of being mothers or not. First, they were clear in defining that they were not looking for a baby in that moment of their lives, but then their stories showed how they were willing to take the risk to have unprotected sex. Likewise, they stated different expressions that demonstrated that in some level they were expecting to get pregnant eventually. Some of the latter were:

*“I took it relaxed because I knew it could happen in any moment”* (her reaction when she got pregnant) (Andrea, 20 year old mother)

My question: *“Did you know there was the possibility of getting pregnant by having unprotected sex?”*



Her answer: *“Yes, yes because I listened too that when you have sex you can get pregnant if you don’t protect, but I didn’t...I ignored the situation (‘me hice la loca’ in Spanish)”* (Silvy, 18 year old mother)

Some of the young interviewees’ stories include that in some way they were “surprised” of not getting pregnant despite of their lack of contraception:

*“I even thought that I couldn’t have children because...imagine...I started my sex life when I was 16 years old and since then...almost until 19 years old...”* (She expresses surprise of how she had unprotected sex for almost three years and she didn’t get pregnant. (Yesenia, 20 year old mother)

Andrea: *“When I stopped protecting (after taking pills) a long time passed to get pregnant, and I said ‘Oh, is it the pills that...?’ (she stops talking) but no’.*

My question: *“So were you surprised? Did you know that getting pregnant was a big possibility?”*

Andrea: *“Yes, I had it in mind”* (20 year old mother)

During the focus group one of the mothers even expressed the following:

*“And yes, is logical that a person that doesn’t protect wants to be a mother, even if it is not planned”* (Elena, 20 year old mother)

Taking into account the two types of cases described, a fundamental question arises: why are these young women taking decisions that in one way or another are leading them to become young mothers?

In general terms, the principal finding of the research is that both “types” of cases include processes where young women have to make decisions about their lives and where their agency is constrained by a powerful structure that influences those choices. As the ecological model establishes, this structure is built up by different actors and institutions, which have effects on young women and men’s decision on their sexuality and fertility: family, partners, friends, school, neighbourhoods and close communities, and public policy, among others. These don’t operate separately, but they constitute different levels that interact constantly between them. In the context of the study, there are two aspects that specially shape young people’s decision making: (i) the cultural aspect, especially in terms of the gender relations rooted in the family and community levels, and (ii) the material aspect, characterized by poverty and lack of opportunities, which is in the national/macro level. The following sections will examine these two aspects in detail. Additionally, at the end of the chapter I present another finding of the research: other factors that influence the use of contraception in the young participants of the study.

#### 4.1. The influence of culture: taking decisions inside a patriarchal system

During the conversations with the three types of participants, something came repeatedly to the table: their imaginaries of gender roles and how these strongly define culture. It was evident that their conceptions of womanhood, manhood, motherhood and fatherhood are notably shaping social relations in their context.

##### Woman equals mother?

The dialogues with the different participants had a resounding message: being a mother is profoundly valued in Cartagena and the Atlantic Coast; it is very rare to meet a woman that doesn't want to be a mother. All the young women interviewed, except for one, affirmed that they were planning to be mothers in one moment of their lives. Even when they said that they were not planning to do it so young, they had it planned for the future, between 20 and 25 years old. They talked about being mothers as something "natural" for every woman, as something not to question:

*"In my mind there was never the idea to be a mother so early...In a later moment of my life, yes, of course...I said that I wanted to have my first child at twenty-something, like at twenty four"*  
(Andrea, 20 years old mother)

*"Sometimes I am in class and the girls ask me if I have children and I say no, and they get surprised and they ask 'when? You are going to miss your time'"* (Manuela, Psychologist)

Florence Thomas (1996) explains that historically women have been defined by their identity as mothers, that it has been "a cultural representation with so much strength that it got to signify us (women) at all" (Thomas 1996: 451). In the Latin American context, the Catholic image of the Virgin Mary brought by the evangelization projects of the "colonization" in the XV century reinforced the image of woman as mother (Op. Cit. 452), and the Atlantic Coast has been one of the Colombian regions with more influence of Catholicism. Different feminist movements have seen this definition –women equals mother– as the foundation of patriarchy (Llanes 2012: 255).

This is consistent with the discussion by Navarro (2009) based on her findings in her qualitative study in the Pacific Coast of Colombia: "In the social practice it is frequent that two categories overlap: woman and mother. In our society the imaginary about women is connected to the concepts of marriage, family, household, children and domestic work, and the definition of woman as mother is indicated as a desired function and with a socially pre-established value" (2009: 52). In this sense, women are raised with persistent messages saying that society expects them to be mothers. Oviedo and García (2011) explain that they receive these messages through multiple objects and activities in their everyday lives: "toys, games, quotidian objects, music, videos, publicity, soap operas, shop windows, and the rituals that mark her transformation from girl to woman" (2001: 933).

## The “normalization” of young motherhood in culture

A comprehensive analysis of the focus group discussion and the interviews allows understanding that young motherhood has become so common in the studied context that there has been a process of “normalization” of the phenomenon in it. All of the young participants mentioned cases of other young mothers in their families or communities: sisters, cousins, sisters in-law, neighbours – and several of them affirmed that it was a common characteristic of the culture in Cartagena. These are depicted in the quotes from the interviews by the study participants:

*“The truth is that my friends took direction before me (...) They had partners and got pregnant before me (...) My stepfather complained to my mother that my friends were the ones that corrupted me because all of them were already pregnant...they were having children before me. There (in her community), the girls were no longer girls, they were already women with children. He said that I got pregnant because of them”* (Andrea, 20 year old mother).

*“In Turbaco (her town, a few minutes from Cartagena) it is something very popular...there are 11 or 12 year old girls that have babies already...and friends younger than me already have children (...) Yes, that has become something of everyday...they already see it like something normal”* (Guillermo, 25 year old father).

*“I consider that I desired the baby because all my sisters have one and I wanted to have my own”* (Yesenia, 20 year old mother).

These views suggests that the girls and women of the region are having an important influence of their close context, since what they mostly see round them is women that are becoming mothers very early. The data collected from interviews with the psychosocial team also supports these views on the influence of culture.

*“Is something that is already seen as normal, it is normal that a 14 year old girl is with a partner, and that she gets pregnant”* (Ernestina, Social Worker).

*“The family context also (influences) (...) where the cousin got pregnant and they saw it as normal, where the sister got pregnant and they saw it as normal, where my mother was a teen mother and for her that was normal”* (Azucena, Social Worker).

## Mixed messages from society

Even though it is very clear that the phenomenon of young motherhood has become so common that the community has normalized it, the participants of the study also mentioned that there is an opposite message from their families, communities and ordinary people from Cartagena that rejects young motherhood.

On one hand there is the situation described in the last section that indirectly or sometimes directly, encourages them to have children. One of the young mothers with a “clear cut” case of “wanted” motherhood expressed the following during the interview:

*“My mother always used to tell me ‘I don’t know what are you waiting for to give me a grandson’”* (Juliana, 18 year old mother). This was during the few years before she got pregnant.

At the same time there are some stories of parents of the young women that were not pleased with the news and for others it was even a cause for fights within families. These were usually based on the argument that being a mother would create obstacles for them to finish their education process.

*“The most difficult thing was when my father arrived (to the clinic when she found out she was pregnant)...he didn’t look at me more, not at all (...) The only words that I remember that he told me were ‘there you go, you wanted to be like the others’ (...) I cried every night...my mom told me ‘look at your eyes, you are crying exactly as your father’...he cried in the dawn...there were three months in which he cried every morning”* (Elena, 20 year old mother).

It is also common that their close communities express messages of rejection:

*“People talk more when they see a pregnant girl (‘pelada’ in Spanish)...that she already dropped out of the studies...they talk about a lot of things, they gossip”* (Silvy, 18 year old mother).

Thus, the youth in the region in general and the young mothers live between these two opposite points of view:

*“Sometimes there are two reactions that from my point of view is...society marks them, they start saying ‘look, this girl...pregnant so early...she doesn’t even know how to wash her panties and she is already pregnant’, but in other contexts they also see it normal ‘oh, she is pregnant...it was about time”* (Diana, Psychologist).

In this way, the young women found themselves making decisions in a structure that presents contradictory messages. Inside this confrontation it is possible to identify that various actors have appropriated the discourse of “teenage pregnancy” that the mainstream research and the media have used in the recent decades in Colombia. Therefore, they focus their critiques on the age of the women and the effect that the issue is going to have in their access to education. This does not mean that all the rejection that family and community express are based on it, but the data collected from interviews suggests that the messages from media influenced by government and NGO views have an important effect on how common people see and think of the phenomenon.

Moreover, draws attention that several of the young mothers used a language in the same discourse to refer to themselves:

*“I haven’t finished saying ‘mom’ and I am already been called ‘mom’”* (Janet, 20 year old mother)

*“Well, we are two children raising another child”* (Andrea, 20 year old woman)

The expression “Children raising children” has been especially popular within the discourse of “teenage pregnancy” in the country and around the world; that is why is very easy to identify the appropriation of the dominant discourse from regular people and the young mothers when describing themselves. Nevertheless, it is possible that these views and expressions are also influenced by how the young mothers really feel. For example, Andrea also mentioned during the interview that she didn’t want to go to live with her boyfriend; the following quote suggests that she still wanted to enjoy her life living with her family:

My question: *“He asked you to go to live with him?”*

Andrea: *“Yes, many times, but I said no, because I didn’t want to be away from my mother and brothers because I said I was going to miss them a lot, and I did”* (when she got pregnant and went to live with her partner)

### **Gendered spaces: dominant conceptions of masculinity and femininity**

The fieldwork made clear that the culture in Cartagena and the Atlantic Coast is still very marked by the traditional definition of gender roles. Even though it is not possible to generalize that a whole region, city or even community has the same view on gender roles, it is evident that there are dominant ideals of men and women that have an influence in this society.

In particular, there is a strong preconceived idea of what is “masculine” and in general terms men act in order to fulfil this view. Based on the Latin American context, Gutmann (2003) calls these “hegemonic masculinities” and explains that dominant expressions of them as machismo “are not simply individual expressions of interpersonal relations in families and households but also pertain to be the very foundations of gender inequality within these societies” (2003: 3). Part of this socially accepted identity of men is the idea that men show their masculinity through their “ability” to have different women. Olavarria (2003) states that in Latin American studies of the topic, there has been an “agreement in the dominant, hegemonic model of masculinity that associates high levels of sexual activity to masculinity” (2003: 96). This belief implies that this sexual desire is biologic, is natural, and in this sense, it is very hard to control. Sex is seen as a “reaffirmation of their masculinity to themselves and to be shown to other men” (Ibid).

Several of the young mothers told stories of infidelity of their fathers and/or their abandonment of the home. Four of the ten interviewees have clear cases of this situation. The following is one of them:

My question: *“How are your relationships with your family?”*

Yesenia: *“With my mother, very well...with my father not so much because...how can I say it? He is never at home. I have things to talk with him but I don’t feel the desire to tell them to him, and he is not willing to hear them...because of the distance that there is between us (...) He used to help us (she and her sister) with homework from school, he was always looking after us, but when the other lady arrived everything changed”* (20 year old mother)  
(...)

My question: *Are your parents still together?*

Yesenia: *Yes*

Navarro (2009) discusses the acceptance of extra marital relations of men in her study in the Pacific Colombian Coast. Based on interviews to adult and young women, she states that men having relationships with multiple women is something seen as “normal” in these

communities (2009: 43). The UNFPA adds in the same direction stating, “in many countries, boys and men are culturally validated for having multiple partners” (UNFPA 2013: 38).

The latter is in line with the belief that women are the ones who have to completely take care or at least lead the raising process of children. Men, on the other hand, are still mostly seen as “breadwinners”, the ones in charge of bringing the income home and with not much responsibility in caregiving. A member of the psychosocial team highlighted this situation during the interview with her:

*“We hold some meetings here, of parents, of partners, and the ones that come least are the men, they stay in the margin of many processes related to their children. It is also a cultural topic...here in Cartagena, in the coast (Atlantic Coast) the machismo is very common, so we always see it as a responsibility of the women...everything related to care and affection”* (Ernestina, Social Worker).

The believe that women are in charge of the raising process is so strong, that even when men leave their homes they expect that women take charge of everything and they criticize them if something goes wrong with the children.

*“Whatever happened to me, if I had a boyfriend, if I took a husband, it was my mother’s fault (for her father) (...) For example, if I didn’t go well at school, it was my mother’s fault, if I fail a course, it was my mother’s fault...anything was my mother’s fault”* (Andrea, 20 year old mother)

This belief comes from the relation that has been established through history between women and nurture based on ideas of biological determinism. “According to this traditional view, our biology determines the way in which we as individuals develop both physically and psychologically, and this in turn determines which roles we are able and choose to play in society” (Crowley, Himmelweit 1992: 60). This view implies that as women are able to give birth to children, they are the “naturally” responsible for raising them. In the Latin American context, the participation of men in caregiving its recent (Promundo 2008: 35).

The different conceptions of masculine and feminine roles lead to multiple cases where the young women have to grow up without the support, care and affection of their fathers. The data collected from interviews with some of the young mothers shows how they have very limited relationships with them, where they saw them every long periods of time (years sometimes):

*“Well, the relationship with my father...when I was a little girl I talked to him...he doesn’t give me much affection. He used to help me economically (...) Sometimes I told him lies to get money from him, but everything was with the intention of being mean to him because he didn’t give me affection, I mean, to call for his attention”* (Janet, 20 year old mother).

*“The relationship with my father was mostly by the phone, because I almost never saw him”* (Andrea, 20 year old mother).

*“I haven’t seen my father in 10 years”* (Silvy, 18 year old mother).

Data from interviews with the psychosocial team are consistent with the stories of the mothers. The four members of the staff interviewed agreed on the prevalence of single-parent households in the young mothers that historically have joined the organization. One of them explained that the young mothers have masculine figures in their lives – their fathers – that cause them pain.

*“Something that we have seen through time in the organization is that the young women have a masculinity that is painful in their lives. Why? Because they come from a father that abandoned them, in the majority, in a lot of cases”* (Ernestina, Social Worker).

The poor presence of their fathers has different effects on them in different ways. According to the interviews with the psychosocial team, the lack of close relationship with their fathers causes that later they feel attached very easily to another man in their lives (possible boyfriend or partner).

Likewise, the situation challenges the raising process in general. Guillermo, the young father who I interviewed, told the story of how his father left the family and it had significant consequences on them:

*“When my father left the house, my mother was just a half-time cashier in a supermarket, so she had a half-time income and in that moment she was paying the house by herself...it was very hard, and that’s why I couldn’t continue in the university...She paid my semester and my brother’s school and successively, so I saw her out of resources (...) it was a hard, hard, hard situation”* (Guillermo, 25 year old father).

Guillermo’s story is an example of how abandonment and the “troubled” dominant masculinity equally affect young men’s lives.

Janet’s father abandoned her when she was a little girl and her mother has done a big sacrifice to be able to support her. She had to move to Bogotá to work there as a housekeeper because she couldn’t find a job in Cartagena, so Janet has had to live with her aunt for the past seven years. During our conversation, she illustrated how difficult it has been growing up without her mother and now becoming a mother herself without her support. Likewise, Janet explains how the abandonment of her father and the distance with her mother had an important influence in her relationship with the father of the child:

*“I was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade when I met the father of my child...since I was not with my mother nor father, he gave like a different kind of affection...I felt that he was like my everything. I trusted him, I told him all my problems...he was always there”*

One of the social workers of the organization added that the conception of men as “providers” is also prominent in the new generation.

*“There is also that conception here, a partner that supports you, that satisfies your needs, and that’s why we see mothers that have had several unions in that search of always depending economically and*

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<sup>5</sup> The quotes from focus group discussion and interviews are translated literally from what the participants say.

*emotionally of a person, and they always have to have someone by their side to satisfy those needs”*  
(Ernestina, Social Worker).

However, in the conversations with the young women there was not clear evidence that they see their partners just in this role. Most of them expressed interest in having a job and their own income.

Regarding family structure and relationships, it is important to take into account that despite the stories presented, there were a few stories of families where the fathers were present and the young mothers affirmed having a good or very good relationship with them. One in particular attracted my special attention; Elena, a 20 year old mother, was proud of the close relationship with her father. For its part, the three young women that explicitly stated that they “planned” their pregnancy had nuclear families and in general had good relationships within them. These differences between the young interviewees suggest that not all men (and women, because they also reproduce culture) behave in the same way, but the fact that an important group of them are sexists (*machistas*), generates dominant ideas of the roles that men and women have to take in society. Likewise, the latter combines with other strong conceptions in society, like the “normalization” of young motherhood, that have a very significant influence in the decision-making processes of young people, particularly around becoming parents.

## **Young Fatherhood**

The behaviour of men happened to be some of the less expected findings of the research. A common belief in Colombia and similar countries is that young women are having babies with men that are significantly older than them. My investigation shows that all the young mothers’ partners, with just one exception, are very close in age to them, around 1 to 4 years older. One of the social workers confirms that this is the common trend in the women of the organization:

*“The majority of their partners are young, the same age as them, maybe three more years”*  
(Azucena, Social Worker).

Seven of the young mothers that participated in the study had a partner and lived with them: the three that have clear-cut cases of “planned” pregnancy and four of the other group. According to the data collected in the focus group discussion and the interviews with the staff, the 10 young mothers and the young father, the observed pattern is that these young men wanted to have their own home soon; they wanted to live together and have babies with their girlfriends when they were both still very young.

*“He used to tell me that he wanted to have a baby with me, because we had been together for three years and before the four years he told me that he wanted to have a baby with me, that he wanted to*



*experiment that, being a father (...) one day he even told me...his birthday is in February, and he told me 'before or after my birthday I want to have a baby with you'" (Andrea, 20 year old mother).*

*"He did want to have a child...because him...well, when I met him he was 25 years old. He told me he wanted his child, that he was already bored of being alone" (Silvy, 18 year old mother).*

*My question: "Why did he want to be a father?"*

*Mandy: "Because maybe he wanted a little person of the two of us, like because of what he felt for me, what both of us felt, a little person with our blood, he wanted to know, to experiment what was that (...) that a baby could change our lives, a reason to be together" (19 year old mother).*

The predominant reasons to want to be a father are "to experiment" and to have company.

The interview with Guillermo, Elena's partner, was very useful to understand some of the young fathers' rationales that the conversations with the mothers suggested. He affirmed that Elena's pregnancy was very pleasant news for him. He explained that even though the pregnancy was not exactly planned and he wanted to finish his professional career first, he used to plan to be a father around that age (22 years old):

*"Maybe I wanted to have them (children) earlier...I wanted to have them early to see them grow, to be contemporary with them"*

It is telling that when I probed further and asked him if he wanted to be a father, he said:

*Guillermo: Yes, like everybody, I wanted to have a baby*

This clearly shows how strong the message of being parents is in their society. Like women, they are also gain a social value when they become fathers; there is an underlying expectation in society that exerts pressure on them.

## **4.2. The influence of material resources: constrained by poverty**

### **Material context: lack of resources and informal labour**

All of the young mothers that are part of "Juan Fe" – how they call the organization in a daily basis – are from strata 1 or 2. The socioeconomic stratification in Colombia is a classification of residential buildings in order to charge a differentiating tariff of public services (DANE 2015). There are six levels of stratification, where strata 1, 2 and 3 are considered "very low", "low" and "medium low", respectively, and therefore they receive a subsidy from the over cost that strata 5 and 6 pay (Ibid). Even though this system is based on the characteristics of the property, in the country it is also used to identify the level of material resources of a person. In this sense, people that live in strata 1 and 2 are typically described as having low material resources.

This situation was confirmed during my visit to the organization. Different stories of the young mothers, father and the members of the psychosocial team reflected that indeed, they

live in conditions of material scarcity. There were two aspects related to poverty that called my special attention: first, their limited access to education beyond the secondary level; and second, the informality of their partner's jobs.

In general, all the young mothers that participated in the study have finished high school; most of them had to stop it for a while because of their pregnancy but then they went back to finish it<sup>6</sup>. After finishing it, three of them did technical and short courses (vocational education) and one did two semesters of Tourism and Languages at a university but she had to stop because of her pregnancy. The rest of them didn't continue studying because they entered the organization right after finishing school or because they were not accepted in SENA<sup>7</sup>. The latter is usually the most viable path for them because they can't afford to pay private institutions. As stated before, in the organization they receive training in technical courses such as hotel services, cuisine and logistics. There they also have an "Employment and Entrepreneurship" office that is in charge of supporting them in the search for jobs or development of their own business when they finish their studies.

One of the most important findings of the research is the precarious work situation of the young mothers' partners. Eight of them finished high school and only two continued studying: one did a technical course in SENA and the other did a few semesters in a university but then he had to stop because of lack of resources. In the moment of the interviews to the young mothers, all of their partners were working. Two of them worked in construction, one as a watchman, one in a hardware store and another one was a soldier; the five remaining were motorcycle-taxi drivers. According to conversations with the participants and other inhabitants of the city, and to my own daily observation, this occupation has become a very relevant phenomenon that started in Cartagena and the Atlantic Coast a few years ago. The four members of the psychosocial team of the organization agreed on the magnitude of the phenomenon and expressed that most of the young mothers in the organization have partners with this occupation.

*"Motorcycle-taxi is the occupation that prevails...this is consequence of...in a general level, in the level of the city...it is consequence of poverty. Men don't have anything else to do, so they learn to drive a motorcycle (...)" (They say) 'well, lets drive a motorcycle-taxi because there is nothing else to do...I don't have work, I don't have a job...I didn't finish school, lets drive a taxi'" (Azucena, social worker).*

Yáñez and Acevedo (2014) affirm that this type of transportation "has its roots in the profound social problems of the Colombian cities, becoming at the same time in a social problem of enormous dimensions" (2014: 37). The lack of opportunities of the population of the region feeds the phenomenon (Op. Cit. 38). Aside from generating a very limited

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6 Only in one case the young mother was forced to leave school because she was pregnant. Close people suggested her to start a legal process against the school, but she didn't want to.

7 SENA is the National Learning Service in Colombia, a public institution that offers vocational education, mostly courses in the technical and technological level.

income, one of the most important limitations of this occupation is that it generates a daily one. In this way, it creates obstacles for them and their partners (the young mothers) in terms of economic stability and development. For example, one of the girls mentioned “*he used to give him 7000 pesos (about USD\$2.5) every day*” for the child maintenance, which not only was not enough, but it forced her to consume every day and not being able to plan for the future.

The situation described above is an example of the general condition of unemployment and underemployment of young people in Colombia, which has been recognized as a relevant phenomenon also in other countries of the region and even in western countries. The unemployment rate for young people between 14 and 28 years old was 15,7% in the third trimester of 2015 (Portafolio 2015). For the 13 cities in the country and their metropolitan areas, the rates were of 11.8% for men and 20.9% for women (Ibid). Taking into account that these numbers don't even show the informality and precariousness of those young people that are counted as been employed, its possible to see that the future in the labor market for youth is full of obstacles, especially for those with fewer resources.

In addition to the latter, it is relevant to mention that two of the young mothers stated that their partners used to be in youth gangs in the past years.

This section illustrates how the young mothers and their partners live in constraint contexts, in terms of access to material resources, especially through their limitations to have a decent and stable source of income. While the organization is training them in different skills, the labor market is not having the proper conditions to receive them later. The next section broadens this discussion.

### **Life plans inside poverty: discourse and practice**

Both in the literature review and in fieldwork- in the middle of conversations with different kind of participants- a particular concept kept coming: life plans<sup>8</sup>. The concept has become very popular – even a buzzword- in the development arena in Colombia and in multiple countries in the world, especially within government officials and NGO workers that are part of programs for youth. The concept has its origins in the promotion of the idea of youth transitions to adulthood that has specially been lead by the UN and the World Bank. “*Youth* seems to be the favourable time to develop it (the plan) (...). The beginning of its exercise relates with the transition from youth to adulthood” (Medan 2012: 80). The term suggests that every young person should have a definition of what to do with their lives, in particular in terms of education, occupation and income generation. Likewise, the concept is in line with the voluntaristic perspective that attributes most of the responsibility of this “transition” to people’s individual choices.

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<sup>8</sup> In Colombia they are called “proyectos de vida”, which translates literally to “life projects”. However, I decided to use “life plans” because it is more used in international literature in English.

The interviews with the four members of the psychosocial team shows that they have the same belief around the term: young mothers, and young people in general, should have a life plan because it is decisive to make the “step” to adulthood, while avoiding falling into “risky” behaviour. The following is a good example of the key expressions about the topic:

*“I think that when you have a structured life plan, established, when you are looking forward, it will be less probable that you get pregnant at certain age...you know where are you going and what do you want...and if you decide to have sex, ok, you have to look for a way of avoiding pregnancy, postpone it for later”* (Marcela, psychologist).

Since Colombia has been obedient on following the international will and policies, it is possible to find the concept of “life plan” in multiple projects for young population, in particular it is an important component of the strategy defined recently to tackle “teenage pregnancy”. The policy document – CONPES 147 – it is titled: “Guidelines for the development of a strategy for the prevention of teenage pregnancy and the promotion of life plans for children, adolescents and young people between 6 and 19 years old”. The document states that there is a very relevant relation between having a life plan and avoiding young motherhood, and therefore there is a “need to develop prevention programs that use the training in life plans and in particular in life skills to modify their contexts, behaviours and believes that can take to different problems, increasing protector factors” (CONPES 147 2012: 6). The latter invites to question: is it just a matter of having a life plan to “modify” a surrounding context?

Even though there is no doubt that having a life plan can be a useful tool to guide a person’s comprehensive development, it seems that social policy in Colombia is going to the extreme pretending that just by having individuals doing life plans, which for young people from low socioeconomic contexts in general include training in skills (vocational education), there is going to be a decrease in a phenomenon as complex as young motherhood. This view is implying that it is up to individuals to act against the forces of their structure, to go beyond the obstacles that poverty or social exclusion might impose to them.

In relation to this, MacDonald (2011) questions the way that youth transitions to adulthood have been defined in the context of the UK social policy, in particular about the NEET<sup>9</sup> that was established in the late 1990s as part of the strategy to tackle youth unemployment (2011: 430). He explains that there has been “a classic tendency in youth policy and some research to interpret youth problems in terms of the alleged deficits of young people (e.g. low ambitions or poor skills cause their unemployment)” (Op. Cit. 431). In this sense, there has not been much of recognition of the structural causes of youth problems like unemployment, which include taking into account social exclusion.

Even though developing a deep discussion on vocational education is not one of the objectives of this paper, it is important to mention that the “youth transitions” and “life plan” discourses promise that skills training will guarantee employment and a future out of

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<sup>9</sup> Not in Education, Employment or Training.

poverty for young people, but the evidence shows that it is not doing it. In Colombia has also happened what Keep and Mayhew describe for the US and UK: “Governments have subscribed to a “gospel of vocationalism” (Grubb, 2004) founded on a simple reading of human capital theory” (HCT) (...) the result has been very high expectations of what a single set of education and training policy moves can achieve” (Keep, Mayhew 2010: 566). The country has been focusing on the creation of targeted programs and information systems that have failed to achieve real dignified futures for youth. Moreover, the same authors explain that “skill has become the policy makers’ lever of choice (...) because it is seen as one of the few avenues of government intervention that can, within a neoliberal paradigm, be depicted as being both ideological neutral and unthreatening to vested interest” (Keep, Mayhew 2010: 566).

The previous discussion gives elements to conclude that the “life plans” discourse that includes vocational education is not proposing real solutions for young people’s lack of opportunities but it is supporting the actual status quo and the social reproduction of poverty.

### **4.3. The use of contraception: influences from family and public policy**

All the young interviewees coincide on explaining that they had some kind of access to information about contraception but in a superficial way. In general, they have received this information in talks at their schools given by health institutions, the Health Department in Cartagena (DADIS, for its acronym in Spanish) or by their schoolteachers. The head of the psychosocial team of the organization explained that schools are taking into account sexual education but as a cross curricular subject, which means that they discuss the topic from various perspectives in different subjects according to their nature, but there is no clear-cut class for sexual education in the institutions.

*“First, we work it as a cross curricular topic in all the educative institutions where there is no academic space that really prepares them for the topic of sexuality, about their sexual and reproductive rights at least, but apparently in all the subjects has to be developed. We also find teachers, formers...not all of them have the competence to address the thematic”* (E, Social Worker).

Regarding sexual education at home, the common trend is that communication about sex with their parents or other members of their families is very limited. They feel embarrassed or ashamed to talk about sex with them.

*“I knew, but I had fear that in my home they would know that I was not the girl they thought I was, that I was not a ‘miss’ anymore (...) There was a lack of trust and maybe that was what caused (she stops) ...I was embarrassed and that was what caused that I got pregnant”* (Nataly, 18 year old mother).

This situation not only limits the understanding of contraception for them but also creates a lot of difficulties in having access to the methods - where to find them, how to get to those places and where to find the economic resources to buy them.

According to the data collected during the focus group discussion and interviews, the young women didn't know their sexual and reproductive rights according to Colombia's law. They have the right to free contraception with their social insurance, but they didn't receive that information from school, nor from their families. They only learnt their rights when they arrived to the organization. This is consistent with Navarro's study in the Colombian Pacific Coast: "in general, the first pregnancy is the one that starts contact with sanitary institutions, and leaves out any option of preventive attention" (Navarro 2009: 55).

## **5. Constrained agency: the exercise of choice inside a challenging structure**

The previous chapter illustrated the complex structure in which the young participants of the study live and take decisions about their sexuality and reproduction. They are embedded in a patriarchal environment that has normalized young motherhood and continues accepting the belief that only women are responsible for raising children. Likewise, they face material precariousness, which is especially evident in their (and their partner's) limitations to access quality education and employment that do not give them better incomes nor real projects or plans for their lives. Additionally, the law and public policy in Colombia have defined sexual and reproductive rights as access to sexual education and contraception without any cost, but they fail to guarantee them in practice (because of the influence of other factors as well).

After identifying these main forces that interplay in the young participants context, the next step in the analysis is to discuss how they exercise their choices inside of it. An important starting point is to acknowledge that their agency is situated and constrained.

The UNFPA establishes that young "pregnancies are generally the result of an absence of choices and of circumstances beyond a girl's control" (2013: vii). This view goes to the extreme of the deterministic approach of youth, which undermines the practice of agency. White and Wyn call this view as "youth victimology", which "defines young people primarily and exclusively in terms of their status as (passive) victims of the circumstances (such as homelessness, unemployment or poverty)" (White, Wyn 1998: 317). The data collected from the interviews with the psychosocial team showed that in general this is the image that they have of the young mothers that are beneficiaries of the organization.

While it is fundamental to recognize the very significant presence of constraints, it would be a mistake to state that there is no agency at all in young people's behaviour. Based on Giddens' ideas and on her research with child soldiers in Mozambique, Honwana (2008) acknowledges that despite the challenging structure that a person might be embedded, there

is not complete disappearance of a person's agency (2008: 12). As stated before, agency can be exercised as negotiation, resistance, and resilience, among others. The following are some relevant stories from the young mothers' experiences.

### 5.1. Stories of negotiation

White and Wyn (1998) argue that research about young people's perspectives on decision making have come to the comprehension that "there are multiple levels of experience, which may be contradictory, so that making a decision which protects one from a danger at one level may expose one to danger at another level" (White, Wyn 1998: 320). The authors see these actions as a way in which young people negotiate their circumstances. According to the data collected during fieldwork, it was possible to identify this kind of behaviour in several of the young mothers.

One of the most relevant examples is Andrea's decision about contraception use.

*"I once started to take them (the pills) (...) but then I didn't...listening a little bit to the talks at school...(...) they said that since I didn't have children the pills could make me infertile, and I said 'no, I'm not going to get infertile, I want to have children' so I stopped taking them"* (Andrea, 20 year old mother).

Her fear of infertility was stronger than her fear of being a young mother. This event shows the important influence of the value of being a mother on her and the obstacles that she had for obtaining accurate information about contraception. However, at the same time it shows that she didn't try to go further and ask for more information about the pills or about another contraception method.

Another example related to negotiation in the use of contraception is Nataly's story. She explained during the interview that she could not look for contraceptive methods because she was ashamed to ask her parents and other members of her family about them<sup>10</sup>. Her case suggests that she prioritized to keep the image of "good girl" with her family had without dimensioning the possibility of getting pregnant at her age. Likewise, it calls attention that in both cases the young women didn't consider abstinence, but they took the decision of having sex without protection acknowledging the risks.

Furthermore, Elena's case shows different kinds of choices that can be interpreted as negotiations within her complex context. During the focus group discussion she told the story of how she got pregnant:

*"I protected with the method that they call the 'traditional', the rhythm, but I did not understand it. He (her partner) was the one who understood it"* (20 year old mother).

In this first explanation she implies that she trusted her partner and she was not very interested on knowing the details of their contraception method. Then, she explained that

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<sup>10</sup> See complete quote in section 4.3

her boyfriend was unfaithful to her some months before she got pregnant. Then she discovered that the other woman was pregnant at the same time as she was. It calls for special attention how she described, while giggling, that she thought that her partner planned to impregnate her because he was afraid to lose her; she gave two reasons about it:

*“He knew that when I found out ‘he is going to have a baby with another woman’ I would leave him, so he said ‘I am going to get you pregnant so that you don’t leave me’”*

*“I think that when he saw ‘oh she is going to the university (because she was close to finish high school) (...) I am the one that understands the method (contraceptive), let’s impregnate her so that she comes to live with me”*

During the interview I had this conversation again with her and she repeated the story in the same way. When I probed further and asked her if she really thought he planned to impregnate her, she gave a positive answer. Finally, she explained that the whole situation was very hard for her, but she decided to stay with him and raise their child together: *“I thought ‘if I leave him, how is it going to be my child’s family?’”*

It seems that it did not bother her too much that her partner decided by himself to get her pregnant. Even by knowing the latter and about her partner’s affair, Elena decided to stay with him because she still loved him and she wanted to guarantee “a family” for her child. She chose to deal with her family and community’s criticism, and even with her own pain, to give to her kid what she considered the best.

## **5.2. Stories of resistance and defiance**

The young women also take choices that can be seen as expressions of resistance and defiance to their constraints. Janet had a stable partner, but months after her baby was born, she discovered that her partner was unfaithful to her, and he hit her twice. She decided to leave him even when her family heavily criticized her, and she did not have help from her parents to take care of her child. During the interview, she described the situation as follows:

*“I got back with him because he told me that he wanted to offer a life to the baby, he wanted to fix things(...) and with the idea that my son could have a father and that he did not have to live what I did<sup>11</sup>, I made the decision of going back with him...but then I realized that I did not love him, that our relationship was not like before and that I could not continue with him just because of my son”*

*“All my aunts say ‘why did she leave the father of the child?’ One of them has two daughters and she does not accept that they leave them because she does not want them to be like me...I tell her ‘you do not know what you are doing to your daughters, because they are suffering with their husbands and I prefer being alone with my son than have a bad life with a man’”*

Her story illustrates how she challenged social norms in their society that give priority to be part of a couple and constituting a family above anything else.

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<sup>11</sup> Her father abandoned her when she was a little girl; for more details, go back to the section “Gendered spaces” in chapter 4.



On the other hand, Elena expressed that she received several critiques from her close community when she got pregnant. As a way to defy this situation, she did many efforts to be an excellent mother and “show it” to society. Llanes (2012) explains that “investing in the good mother identity as a resilient practice can generate a contradiction. The young mothers’ resistance to hegemonic discourses that stigmatize them it is framed in the same norms that they are trying to reject” (2012: 244). Therefore, in their attempt to defy they are responding with acts that are also part of the patriarchal system, like accepting that taking care of children is a women’s duty.

The different examples of negotiation and resistance demonstrate that while it is evident that young women are not just victims of the situation, unfortunately it is not possible to say that they are taking decisions that are really transforming their lives. They are indeed exercising their agency, but these decisions are not giving them the real chance to choose a life that they want. Moreover, in the long term they are part of the perpetuation of the status quo characterized by patriarchal relationships and socio-economic inequality.

### **5.3. Absence of alternatives**

Kabeer (1999) discusses the relationship between power, choices and alternatives when analysing women’s empowerment. She states “one way of thinking about power is in terms of the ability to make choices: to be disempowered, therefore, implies to be denied choice” (1999: 436). Then the author specifies, “*choice necessarily implies the possibility of alternatives?*” and one of the principal ways in which this premise is fulfilled is when the person has the material resources to fulfil their basic needs (Ibid). In the case of the young participants of the study, the latter is not achieved, and additionally, there is presence of social norms as the “normalization” of young motherhood and the definition of gendered spaces that constraint their exercise of choice. As Okwany (2015) points out based on her study on girls from disadvantaged context in Kibera, Kenya, “the choices they make are limited and influenced by the options available for them” (Okwany 2015).

Taking into account the positions of both authors, it is possible to establish that both types of cases identified during the study – the young women that consciously took the decision of getting pregnant and the ones that did not but in practice accepted young motherhood as a “normal” or “natural” path for them – did not have real alternatives to choose from, so they ended up “choosing” motherhood. The combination of material precariousness and gender inequality in their contexts makes up a situation with a very high propensity to end in young motherhood.

Navarro explains that in this kind of context, there is a tendency that women use motherhood as a “means” for protagonism in their families and communities (Navarro 2009: 63). In the same sense, having children is a way to achieve something more. “Children have symbolic value in the way they confer social legitimacy to women, emotional gratification and they are perceived as a source of power” (Llanes 2012: 241).

Katrina Turner (2004) developed a study comparing young women's (not mothers) views from high and low resource background on young motherhood in Scotland, in which she concluded that women from less resources "perceive fewer negative implications of becoming a mother" (2004: 237). She explains that the opportunity cost of getting pregnant is not that significant for them, compared to women from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. In the Colombian context, Oviedo and García (2011) make a similar comparison and explain that for some women youth is a moment to prepare for adulthood, in achieving their autonomy mostly in terms of professionalization and looking for a place in the labour market. Pregnancy is seen as a desire, but it is postponed until the "right" conditions are established. On the other hand, for a different group of women – women from a disadvantaged background- "autonomy happens in the pregnancy; for them there is not a waiting time because there is nothing to prepare for nor how to do it (...) since early ages they have assumed adult roles centred in care and support for their families" (2011: 934).

These explanations allow concluding there is indeed a difference in the way they perceive motherhood between women that live in material scarcity and the one that do not. Likewise, when a situation of poverty intersects with a community where is gender inequality is so rooted, the alternatives for young people, especially women, are particularly limited.

## **Conclusion: Enabling meaningful choices for young people**

### **The need for structural change**

The study gives significant elements to conclude that it is definitely a mistake to define young motherhood in Colombia as an "unwanted" event for young people. However, it also shows that calling it "wanted" without problematizing the term will also be a mistake. What the findings of the study add to the discussion is the acknowledgement that in Colombia there are young women that live in contexts that establish multiple obstacles for their comprehensive development. In the case of the participants of the study, they live in an environment where the intersection of material precariousness and gender inequality leaves them with very few or deficient choices for life. In this way, motherhood appears as one of a few or the only option for young women.

Even though it is key to recognize that young women do have agency and practice it in many ways, it is also fundamental to understand that this agency is constrained by a structure that has enormously strong forces that in general do not permit that their actions change the status quo. What calls attention is that the Colombian government is already partially aware of the situation but keeps focusing on targeting young women on their individual level. The CONPES 147 uses the ecological framework and it acknowledges the important influence of

factors such as poverty and culture, which include social norms about sexuality, femininity and masculinity (2012: 17). However, public policy keeps targeting young women and focalizing the efforts on the supply of sexual and reproductive services, which are valuable but are not making the difference.

As Oviedo and García (2001) clearly establish it: “in summary, the immature pregnancy of women of lower strata and its negative effects, is not the problem that needs work, but are the structural conditions, the scarcities that mark the construction of the feminine subjectivity” (Oviedo, García 2001: 932). In this way, governments, NGO or multilateral organizations can continue to develop programs around sexual education and access to sexual and reproductive health, but while there is not real will to tackle structural poverty, social exclusion and patriarchal social norms, the results of these will always be marginal.

### **Real alternatives for young people**

The analyses of the “life plan” and “vocational education” discourses were developed with the objective of showing that the solution is not just imposing a “life model” that all young people should take to become “productive” for society, but that the real challenge is to give real *alternatives* to them to choose from. The challenge is not to enforce any defined trajectory for young women or men, but to concentrate on working to end poverty, inequality, and social exclusion, while battling traditional gender roles to provide them with environments where they are not just valued for having children nor for having a skill, but that they can live a life that they value. The latter could include becoming a mother or a father at an early age, at 25 or at 35, or not become parents at all, but giving them the chance to have real opportunities, which as Kabeer (1999) defines, it means having *alternatives* to choose.

Of course, young people can and should participate in the construction of better conditions of life for them, but taking into account power relations, there should be leadership from policy makers, NGO, activists and civil society.

### **Recommendations for future research**

Even though my study makes an attempt to take into account men’s points of view, there is still need to develop research where young men are the focus, especially men from disadvantaged backgrounds - fathers and non-fathers. The latter with the purpose of understanding in a deep level their rationales and points of view around sexuality, reproduction and fatherhood. Good news for now is that the ENDS 2015 will include men as participants, which vastly enriches the discussion.

Finally, Katrina Turner’s (2004) investigation evidences that there is an important difference of the points of view of young women who are already mothers and the ones that are not. In this way, another recommendation is to develop qualitative research with young women

from low socio-economic levels that are not mothers to explore their perceptions about young motherhood.

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# ANEX 1. Guides for semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion

## Guide – Interview Young Mothers

### Context about their lives

- 1) What is your current occupation? (study, job)
- 2) How has been your education process? (education level and how you feel about school)
- 3) How is your family structured? How is the relationship with them? Who do you live with?
- 4) Do you participate or have participated in any activity with your community? (Church, sports, etc)
- 5) How would you describe your life before getting pregnant? (In the following aspects: family, education, job, love life and social life)

### Regarding their pregnancy and motherhood

- 6) How old were you when you got pregnant? How old are you now?
- 7) Do you consider that your pregnancy was wanted? Why or why not?  
If positive answer: why did you want to be a mother?
- 8) How was your family's reaction? (When you got pregnant and after having the child)
- 9) How was your close community's reaction? (School, neighbourhood, etc) (When you got pregnant and after having the child)
- 10) Do you feel that becoming a mother changed the way your family and close community saw you? How?
- 11) What do you think the following actors think about young motherhood in general?
  - a. The organization
  - b. Random people in Cartagena
- 12) How is your relationship with the father of your child? How was it before you got pregnant? How old is he? What is his occupation?  
Did you desire the pregnancy together? (optional)  
How was the father's reaction when you told him you were pregnant?
- 13) How was your personal process of becoming a mother? How was your first reaction?  
How are you feeling now?
- 14) Being a mother is how you thought it would be?
- 15) How did your life change in the following aspects?:
  - a. Personal
  - b. Relationship with partner
  - c. Relationship with family
  - d. Relationship with community
- 16) Do you know any other women that are young mothers?
- 17) Do you consider that you have a life plan? Did you have it before getting pregnant?
- 18) Have you received any kind of sexual education? How was it? (place and content)

- 19) What would be your message to other young women that are considering becoming mothers at an early age?

### **Guide – Interview Young Father**

Context about their lives

- 1) How old are you?
- 2) What is your current occupation? (study, job)
- 3) How has been your education process? (education level and how you feel about school)
- 4) How is your family structured? How is the relationship with them? Who do you live with?
- 5) Do you participate or have participated in any activity with your community? (church, sports, etc)

Regarding their partner's pregnancy and fatherhood

- 6) Did you desire your partner's pregnancy? Why or why not?  
If positive: why did you want to be a father?
- 7) How was your family's reaction? (When your partner got pregnant and after having the child)
- 8) How was your close community's reaction? (School, neighbourhood, etc) (When your partner got pregnant and after having the child)
- 9) Do you feel that becoming a father changed how your family and close community saw you? How?
- 10) What do you think the following actors think about young parenthood in general?
  - a. The organization
  - b. Random people in Cartagena
- 11) How is your relationship with your partner?
- 12) Being a father is how you thought it would be?
- 13) Do you know any other women or men that are young parents?
- 14) Do you consider that you have a life plan? Did you have it before you became a father?
- 15) Have you received any kind of sexual education? How was it? (place and content)

### **Guide – Interview Psychosocial Staff**

- 1) In general, what are the characteristics of the young women that the organization supports? (ages, education levels, personalities, etc)
- 2) How are their families?
- 3) How common is “wanted” pregnancy in the mothers that arrive to the organization?
- 4) What do you consider the principal causes of young motherhood? (for different types of motherhood)
- 5) Are the causes of motherhood different by socioeconomic levels? Why or why not?

- 6) How are the young mothers' partners? (ages, occupations, their relationship with the mothers)
- 7) What is the common reaction of their partners about the pregnancy?
- 8) In general, how are the reactions of family and the close community about the pregnancies?
- 9) Is being a young mother socially valued in their contexts?
- 10) What are the consequences of young motherhood?

### **Guide – Focus Group Discussion**

- 1) How have been your experiences as young mothers?
- 2) What has been the best and the most difficult thing of being a young mother?
- 3) Was young motherhood in your plans? For what moment of your lives?
- 4) What does being a mother means to you?
- 5) Do you think that your image changed for the following actors when you got pregnant?
  - a. Family
  - b. Close community
  - c. People at school and/or job
  - d. Partner